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Israeli Push Into Lebanon Was Predicted

Israel's massive invasion deep into Lebanon was forecast with amazing accuracy by a longtime adviser to President Reagan, but the president never saw the pinpoint prediction. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger spiked it.

As a result the White House was shocked and angry when Israeli troops ranged throughout southern Lebanon and as far north as Beirut, instead of restricting their operations to the border area, as most of the president's intelligence experts had led him to expect.

While impossible to tell whether the United States could have dissuaded Israel from its all-out offensive with five months' advance warning, at least the president would have been spared the embarrassment of being caught flat-footed by the scope of the invasion. Here's the story of the wasted prediction:

On Jan. 6, five months to the day before Israel made its move into Lebanon, Joseph Churba, a top official of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, wrote an internal memo to his boss, ACDA Director Eugene Rostow. He titled his memo "A Likely Israeli Initiative."

Churba was no amateur tea-leaf reader. He had served in Air Force Intelligence under Presidents Nixon and Ford. In 1979 he became a senior foreign policy adviser to candidate Reagan, and was appointed to the disarmament agency in the new administration.

Churba correctly gauged the significance of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights in December. He said it was "most likely the prelude to an Israeli military initiative designed to redraw the political map in Lebanon."

Like other intelligence experts, Churba linked the long-expected Israeli move against the Palestine Liberation Organization sanctuary in southern Lebanon to the April 25 Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. It would be a means of protecting Israel's northern flank "vis-a-vis Syria and the PLO," he said, as well as a test of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's good intentions toward the Camp David peace agreement.

But most of the top-secret analyses last winter offered the soothing prediction that Israel would stop at the Litani River in the border area, as it did in 1978. Churba disagreed.

"A repeat of the earlier Litani operation is ruled out," he wrote, "and in any case Israel does not intend to pay twice for the objective, only to surrender it under U.S. pressure."

Then Churba spelled out the goal of the Israeli attack in explicit terms: "Its intention must be nothing less

than delivering a knockout blow against the PLO and removing Lebanon as a confrontation state or staging area. If so, the Israelis must sweep through the [United Nations] buffer zone beyond the Litani, eliminate the 15,000 PLO force and link the two areas under Lebanese Christian control. In effect, Lebanon will be partitioned."

Rostow sent Churba's memo to Weinberger at the Pentagon. In a "Dear Gene" note, which my associate Dale Van Atta has seen, Weinberger kissed off Churba's prediction in a single sentence:

"While I agree that Israel has a genuine concern over PLO presence in southern Lebanon, it is doubtful that a military operation will rectify this situation."

Though Weinberger did acknowledge the "complications" for U.S. policy of an Israeli attack, "including the danger of expanded hostilities," the aura of Cloud Nine wishful thinking that clung to him was expressed in his conclusion that the United States must "continue to urge restraint on our Israeli friends and press for a resolution of the problems through negotiations."

In other words, Weinberger simply missed the point of Churba's explicit warning.

Footnote: Churba resigned his government post last month, in disgust over what he termed the administration's "bankrupt" foreign policy.